

‘The Hermit Next Door’: The Role of Eremitism/Asceticism in Contemporary Shamanic Healing Practices in North East Scotland

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DOI: 10.21104/CL.2021.4.03

Abstract

Based on an ethnographic study of ‘Western’ forms of contemporary shamanism in North East Scotland, the article discusses the significant role that eremitism plays in folk healing systems, particularly in shamanism. The tendency to live an isolated life is not only a key feature of traditional shamanic healing practices, but it can also be found in contemporary manifestations of them. Two such cases are discussed in this article. Terry Mace and Norman Duncan are two contemporary shamanic healers who live and offer services in the wider region of North East Scotland. For different individual reasons, they have self-consciously decided to isolate themselves geographically, living simply and self-abundantly, and leading an eremitic way of life away from materialism and socialising. The article thus focuses on examining the role of eremitism in the life of these two healers in an attempt to highlight the significance of the phenomenon in contemporary shamanisms.

Key Words

eremitism, asceticism, contemporary shamanism, folk healers and healing practices, North East Scotland

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Jak citovat / How to cite

Barmapalexis, Athanasios. 2021. ‘The Hermit Next Door’: The Role of Eremitism/Asceticism in Contemporary Shamanic Healing Practices in North East Scotland. *Český lid* 108: 455–477. <https://doi.org/10.21104/CL.2021.4.03>

Introduction

Living in seclusion for spiritual reasons is a tradition that can be found in most magico-religious systems, official or unofficial (see Wimbush – Valantasis 1995; Bronkhorst 2001; Deezia 2017). This secluded way of life has become known as ‘eremitism’ or ‘asceticism’.¹ It is considered a journey for spiritual transformation and self-reflection towards eternal bliss through self-sufficiency and a simple way of life, wherein the secluded person renounces pleasures, focusing instead on his or her own mental and physical development (Smith 2005: 345). Besides official religious practitioners such as the monk, the fakir, or the yogi, the unofficial ‘practitioner of magico-religious healing, like the primitive “shaman”, the powwower and the conjurer’ (Yoder 1972: 204–205), commonly known as the folk healer, also typically leads an eremitic lifestyle. This practitioner tends to reside in remote places within or outwith his or her community, focusing on his or her spiritual self-maintenance and self-discipline, while also offering his or her services as a healer (Hufford 1983).

Life in isolation is also a prevalent feature within the phenomenon of the folk healing tradition of shamanism. It is considered a pivotal component for the transformative process of the shamanic healer, not only during their initiation, as part of a longstanding community tradition, but also throughout their tenure, as a ‘process of psychotherapeutic individuation’ that will help the shamanic healer confront a lifetime of integrating burdens and illnesses (Takiguchi 1990: 33).

Similar attempts to lead a life in isolation for spiritual reasons are also to be found in contemporary ‘Western’ manifestations of shamanistic practices, known as ‘neo-shamanism(s)’. Two such examples of this are the ‘neo-shamanic’ healers, Terry Mace and Norman Duncan, who live in North East Scotland.

After a series of unexpected events that affected his physical and mental health, the first individual, Mace, decided to isolate himself in a farmhouse in the woods of Banffshire so that he could re-approach his life and spirituality. After spending almost four decades abroad searching for his own spiritual path, the other healer, Duncan, decided to return to his hometown of Aberdeen to look after his elderly parents. However, instead of settling in Aberdeen, which would have given him access to a new clientele, he chose to move into an isolated property in the woods of Newmachar, where he would be able to focus on his own life cycle.

1 For the purposes of this article the two terms will be used interchangeably, with exactly the same meaning.

Drawing upon ethnographic data collected between 2014 and 2019, in the following text I explore the tradition of eremitism in neo-shamanism(s) in presenting the cases of the two aforementioned practitioners. I specifically focus on the events, reasons, and rationales that led to their decision for seclusion, cross-examining them with ideas on social isolation, seclusion in spirituality, or spiritual calls, as well as other traditions, both older and contemporary, which promote self-sustenance and the urge to return to nature. The aim of the paper is to examine how eremitism/asceticism manifests itself in contemporary Western healing traditions, and in neo-shamanism(s) in particular, and in what ways it has evolved in modern times as part of the dynamic nature of human culture. However, before examining the specific cases of the two healers as contemporary hermits, I will first briefly discuss shamanism(s) and neo-shamanism(s), followed by some key scholarly approaches on asceticism/eremitism and their role in healing and shamanism.

Shamanism and neo-shamanism

Shamanism is a complex and multi-layered set of rituals, ceremonies, mythologies, dance, music, healing practices, and worldviews, revolving around the presence of a local spiritual agent, the 'shaman'. Linguistically, the term derives from the Tungus-speaking Evenki people in Siberia, who used the word *šaman* – meaning someone 'who is excited, moved, or raised' (Siikala 1978: 14) – to refer to their local practitioners (Hutton 2001: 32). In early literature, the *šaman* was depicted as an individual dressed in animal skins and headdresses made of antlers, who beat drums while performing in the community's settings (Witsen 1682: 634, 662–663, 896). These depictions of 'otherness' and 'exoticness' fascinated European scholars and explorers, who embarked on year-long expeditions to discover similar figures elsewhere. Their discoveries revealed some sometimes striking commonalities between all local spiritual practitioners: they all went into a state of trance in order to gain access to spirit worlds; their main function was that of a healer; and, they had acquired their knowledge through training (Vitebsky 1995: 18, 23, 25, 33, 39, 59–63). Soon, the Anglicized term 'shaman' was attributed to all such practitioners, and therefore 'shamanism' became an overarching, universalised term.

The term 'shamanism' as a universal phenomenon has caused considerable debate in academia. Many scholars criticized shamanism for being a generalised, abstract, and flawed concept of scholarly theories and creative imaginations (Atkinson 1992: 307; Insoll 2004: 29) which over-simplifies diverse traditions and blends them together in a single term. However, sha-

manistic analogies and terminologies are even used in scholarly works that emphasise uniqueness and locality (see, Taussig 1987), thus indicating that shamanism has already become an established academic concept. Recent scholarly efforts to address this issue have suggested that we should rather speak of 'shamanisms' instead of a single 'shamanism', arguing that the term in its plural form underlines and acknowledges the plurality and diversity of similar phenomena (Atkinson 1992: 308; Thomas – Humphrey 1994), which is a notion that the author of this article also accepts and follows.

In recent years, shamanism has also emerged as a healing tradition in the 'Western' world. This has been the gradual outcome of modern-day phenomena such as globalisation and new means of travel and communication, which have contributed to reducing cultural isolation and promoting inter-cultural interaction and geographic mobility. Many 'Westerners' have therefore been able to encounter 'non-Western' spiritualities. This trend of exploring other spiritualities started in the late sixties and early seventies with the New Age movement, whereby a variety of diverse spiritual beliefs and practices from both the 'Western' and 'non-Western' worlds were mixed together (Sutcliffe – Gilhus 2013). This happened for a variety of reasons, such as a new tendency towards spiritual individuality, the decline of official religious values, the rejection of conventional medicine, and also scepticism and alienation caused by the post-modern way of life (von Stuckrad 2002). The people involved in the movement began to seek meaning in life, self-reflection, a (re)connection with nature, and social bonding with like-minded people through holistic traditions (Hanegraaff 1996).

Shamanism fascinated 'Westerners' in particular; in the New Age movement, romantic depictions of the phenomenon in contemporary literature had popularised ideas of trance, shamanistic healing and the exotic 'Other' (von Stuckrad 2003; Znamenski 2004). There have been two trends with regard to shamanism in the post-modern 'Western' world: the first is that of individuals practising in private and assessing their own healing development, or neo-shamanistic drumming groups coming 'together to journey [...] and share experiences' in weekend workshops (Hutton 2001: 156–62; Wallis 2003: 49); the second is that of individuals developing relationships and 'creative engagements' with local teachers from traditional shamanistic societies during their spiritual quest (Harvey – Wallis 2007: 7). Upon their return to the 'Western' world and its settings, these people have decided to make their acquired knowledge available to others by offering services similar to those of their teachers. Their healing practices are either syncretic, mixing translocal shamanistic techniques and worldviews with local 'Western' concepts and ideas, or reinventions/reconstructions of earlier local traditions, both recontextualised according to what is 'relevant to the (ir)

land and era', which has always been the way shamanism has worked (Sanson 2012: 255; Wallis 2003; Barmpalexis 2020). This multitude of practices has given contemporary forms of shamanism a diverse nature and has thus avoided 'the methodological traps of assuming all neo-shamanisms are the same' (Wallis 2003: 30). Two such individuals are the subject of this article.

Eremitism/asceticism

As mentioned in the introduction to this article, asceticism/eremitism is found cross-culturally in most religions. Deezia defines it as a practice 'of self-denial, self-abnegation, self-inflicting pains, and renunciation for the purpose of achieving a transcendental goal' (Deezia 2017: 87). Chadbourn (2014) adds that it is 'concerned with both the impulse to exceed denial and the want to moderate it'. Practices typically regarded as ascetic are fasting, abstinence, chastity, life in seclusion, and a total or partial abandonment of materiality. However, as Johannes Bronkhorst (2001) correctly remarks, while one can speak of a cross-cultural asceticism with some common features, local representations of ascetic traditions vary according to their local contexts, as is the case with shamanism.

One of the first scholars to examine asceticism as a universal phenomenon was the historian Cuthbert Butler (1932). Butler divided it into two types in regard to 'attitude towards the body' (Wimbush – Valantasis 1982: 9): natural and unnatural. He suggested that the former reduces materialism and does not maim the body or cause it to suffer, while the latter torments the body. Robert Thurman (2002) made a similar attempt to categorise asceticism into two types. He concluded that asceticism can be divided into the spiritual – the methodical attempt to achieve spiritual self-accomplishment – and the mundane, which aspires 'to states of extreme and permanent pleasure and calm' (Deezia 2017: 94). Finally, ascetic practices in some traditions are thought to bring, enhance, and make one able to control supernatural powers (Fuechs 2006). Shamanism is among those traditions.

When it comes to eremitism and folk spiritual healing, folk healers tend to be found on the back roads 'even in the most ordinary of [...] rural communities' and are regarded by the community as outsiders with supernatural powers 'whose charisma disturbs' the community due to their peculiar lifestyles, powers and knowledge (Yoder 1972: 204). For the healers, a life in isolation helps them maintain an inner physical and mental balance, enabling them to implement their knowledge for the benefit of others (Hufford 1983). In addition to their healing abilities, the healers are also able to socially integrate the whole community, which means that when

treating the patient, the healer attempts to cure not only the patient, who is an integral part of the community, but also the folk community as a whole, which might have been affected by this illness (Yoder 1972: 205–6).

As previously mentioned, in shamanism seclusion can be either an involuntary tradition as part of the community's long-standing customs or a voluntary decision (Walsh 1994). For the shamanic healer, a life of isolation usually begins with their training, a period of 'self-denial and pain', where any kind of exclusion and austerity are considered significant for their transformative development (Singh 2018: 11–13). Upon their return from training, the shamanic healers reintegrate into the community as 'fully functional' individuals, where they serve as vital members of the community, providing services for the maintenance of its harmony (Hultkrantz 1973: 34; Vitebsky 2000: 152, 163). However, when they are 'off-duty', the unique charisma of the shamanic healers seems to disappear. They once again tend to be 'socially peripheral and morally ambiguous, [with a] life full of traumatic incidents such as illness, divorce, and poverty', and they tend to reside on the margins of the community (Takiguchi 1990: 1).

Examples of eremitic life in shamanism can be found throughout the world. The tradition was prevalent among the Incas during medieval times (Classen 1990: 101), a fact which is confirmed by the accounts of many Christian missionaries, who described encounters with Inca hermits in the Andes (Hyland 2003: 164–5). Knud Rasmussen notes that the shamanic healers of the Inuit people believed that a secluded life would benefit their psychological and meditative development. They believed that 'the power of solitude is great and beyond understanding' (Rasmussen 1929: 114). Eremitism is also of great importance in Eastern Asian traditions: it was practised by Japanese Shugendō mountain priests, Tsuguro practitioners, Javanese shamans, and Nepalese monks (see Swanson 2005; Tanaka 2005; Beatty 2004; and Maskarinec 2005, respectively).

An excellent ethnographic illustration of the role of secluded life in contemporary shamanic healing is presented in Takiguchi's 1990 article, *Liminal Experiences of Miyako Shamans: Reading a Shaman's Diary*. Takiguchi's main contributor was a healer named NT, who practised on the Japanese island of Miyako. Takiguchi explored NT's life within his community not only in relation to his spiritual journey, but also to the struggles and setbacks that shamanism brought to his life. Among the issues discussed in the article are NT's life on the social periphery of his village and his life of trauma and poverty, themes that will be addressed in the lifestyles of the two contemporary 'Western' neo-shamanic healers who are the subjects of this study, the first of whom is Terry Mace.

Terry Mace: financial and health difficulties and life in isolation

Terry Mace was born in the early 1960s in Middlesex, England. At present, he offers his services as a healer in North East Scotland. I met Mace in March 2014, while in the process of finding contributors for my research. At that time, Mace lived in Cullen, a coastal village in Moray.

Mace was initiated into shamanistic traditions by Maori and Australian Aboriginal people in the period 2001–2004. He received a non-formal, experiential training in communication with nature and its healing capacity alongside a Maori, while alongside the Aboriginal people of the Meningie province in South Australia, Mace eventually became a bone and mud *karadji* (meaning 'clever man' in the local dialect). Mace combines this shamanistic knowledge with his own educational and professional background in Philosophy and transactional analysis and therefore conforms to the idea that 'neo-shamanisms' are an amalgamation of different practices distilled with shamanistic worldviews and techniques. He calls himself a 'twenty-first-century contemporary shaman', emphasising the fact that his practices, teachings, and ideas are appropriate to the current context within which 'westerners' currently live and operate.

Since our initial introduction, Mace and I have really bonded, and we have become friends, aside from the relationship we had as researcher and contributor. During one of my visits to Cullen in May 2015 to visit another friend called Terry, Mace confided to me that he was concerned about his financial situation brought about by his decision to not charge for his services. His income was entirely based on donations and sometimes they were not even in the form of monetary compensation. Mace had the romantic idea that the ideal contemporary healer needed to be as humble as his counterparts in traditional shamanistic communities, i.e., a job well done is the healer's reward, and Mace was true to this notion for a long time. However, in mid-2015, he was starting to realise that this approach might have been naïve.

It was only then that he began to realise the harsh reality that a steady income is very important in a socio-economically complex 'Western' society such as Britain. Consequently, he told me of his intention to start charging his clientele for his services. In his mind, this decision was more related to an inner process of self-evaluation and self-worth rather than a pure, pragmatic understanding of reality.

However, even though his decision to charge for his services was supported by most of his clientele, his financial difficulties continued. He had to close his shop in late 2015, as he could not afford the running costs, and the 'final blow' came when he and his partner, Christine, were asked

to leave their house in Cullen. Unable to find an affordable property in the nearby area, they decided to start looking for a house in the greater Aberdeenshire region.

In May 2016, after months of intensive searching and numerous house viewings, Mace and Christine finally relocated to a remote farmhouse on the outskirts of the small community of King Edward in Banffshire. There were only farmlands in the vicinity of their house and no local amenities nearby. Mace had carefully chosen the location of his new residence to allow himself the space and time to re-evaluate and re-consider his shamanistic work and his goals, and to avoid making the same mistakes he felt he had made in Cullen. In King Edward, Mace attempted to broaden his clientele by inviting new people to his rituals and ceremonies, which I noticed in a Samhain ritual I participated in late October of the same year. Nevertheless, even in the new location, Mace still came up against the same issues. Not only did his financial situation not improve, but he was also becoming more concerned about the learning difficulties of his second daughter.

These constant concerns took their toll on Mace's health. A few days before his first major weekend workshop at his farm in late January 2017, Mace was rushed to the Aberdeen Royal Infirmary after suffering a major heart attack. He was there for almost a week. 'Facing death' changed Mace's perception on many matters, among them his dedication to healing others. Since then, his life and health have changed significantly, leading to a prolonged period of re-evaluation and social isolation.

My first visit to his home was in early March. One of the first things that became apparent to me was his disappointment about what had happened: *'If I cannot heal myself, why would I be willing to heal others?'* he told me.

However, even though he was doubtful about his abilities and his future as a healer, his description of the events that led to the incident and the incident itself were couched in shamanistic terminology and analogies. In his view, the Samhain ceremony that I had attended was the crucial moment that caused this to happen to his body. Mace believed that he nearly died for all the males gathered at the ritual. He connected it to the fact that most of the male participants had either heart conditions or someone in their family had a heart condition – myself included, as my father has had heart disease for almost fifteen years. *'It's as if I suffered the heart attack for all those people'*, he conjectured. Furthermore, he believed a crucial element was the fact that even though I was placed at the centre of the ritual, I was not mentally prepared for the impact that the ritual might have on my life. He had therefore overlooked the fact that my unpreparedness would make him susceptible to the spirits he had connected with for the ritual and, as a consequence, he had been unable to control them.

Mace and I had discussed this issue of vulnerability during a ritual. Mace once admitted that he often feels defenceless against the spirit world during a ritual and this exposure has psychosomatic effects on him. Consequently, Mace's mental and financial instability might have resulted in him being spiritually unprepared, physically weak, and, therefore, vulnerable to the spirits during the 2016 Samhain ritual, and this could be a possible explanation for his later illness.

The mental impact of the incident was difficult for him to overcome. During our conversation, he kept expressing his frustration and disappointment about how the heart attack had altered his attitude towards life, spirituality, and his work as a healer. '*It made me more like you*', he told me, '*More cynical*'. For instance, even though he had initially created healing rituals for his prescribed tablets, he later convinced himself to abandon this idea and simply follow the doctors' orders. Above all, he had to start looking after himself physically, which made him realise that even though he had been emphasising the inter-connectedness between physical and spiritual wellness in his teachings, he had overlooked it in himself.

Roger Walsh notes that experiences of death/rebirth, such as the one Mace had, 'most likely occur at times of overwhelming emotional arousal and stress' and result in a profound crisis where the former inner forces 'are no longer enough to maintain the former psychological balance', which usually leads to a spiritual reconstruction, as seen with Mace. Walsh continues by pointing out that 'the old psychodynamic forces, conflicts, habits, conditioning, organization, beliefs, and identity are overwhelmed, and the psyche's organization temporarily collapses' (Walsh 1994: 25). All these notions are particularly evident in Mace's case and mental state.

Nevertheless, even with a more pragmatic or cynical attitude towards life, Mace continued to address the events that had altered his life 'shamanically': he considered the aftermath of his heart attack to be 'another shamanic death for Terry Mace', with his life now needing to enter a new transitional 'rebirth' stage. He also saw this as an opportunity to re-evaluate the gift of life, as well as to engage in a new individual journey of self-rediscovery: '*It is like a new adventure for me*', he said, '*It's part of the "journey." I'm going to self-facilitate in the wilderness. It almost feels like the shaman who went back into the cave for a while.*' Mace's characterisation of his spiritual and physical retreat as '*going back into a cave*' illustrates how he perceives his voluntary seclusion.

The psychologist James House suggests that the decision for social isolation can be both 'a potential cause and a symptom of emotional or psychological challenges' (House 2001: 273), while Cheryl Svensson adds that a period of social alienation and separation from family, friends and

the community could be a result of various and diverse causes, among them a sudden illness, as experienced by Mace (Svensson 2015). When it comes to social estrangement due to mental issues in relation to shamanism, Julian Silverman notes that ‘feelings of fear, guilt, impotence, and failure’ could lead healers to extended periods of isolation and alienation, which might result in an ensuing cognitive reorganisation (Silverman 1967: 23). These notions are borne out in the comments and thoughts of Mace.

During his isolation, Mace came into contact with only a handful of people. The only new acquaintance he made during that period was with my friend, Valerie. Their first encounter was in June 2017, when we visited him together.

Valerie was also in a transitional period in her life. Having just finished her studies at the University of Aberdeen, she had feelings of constant uncertainty and inner pressure, in addition to external pressures from family and friends regarding her future choices and plans. I was aware of her concerns and thought that a talk with Mace might benefit her. She said

‘He gave me the advice that, next time they asked, to put on a serious face and tell them I was to become a magical dolphin farmer. The idea was that, whatever it was that I told them, it would make no difference to the process that I had to go through to figure out my next step, and also to throw them off a little bit and observe their reactions.’
(Valerie Wecker, 21 July 2017, Elphinstone Institute Archives)

Valerie noted though that ‘once he did delve into advice it was definitely very direct, almost harsh in the sense that he said things you didn’t really want to admit to yourself but needed to hear’. She also said that Mace admitted to her that it was this directness and earnestness that sometimes made him unpopular with his clients, as they did not want to deal with the actual source of their issues.

Three years since the incident, Mace still lives a secluded life with his partner Christine, and has relocated to another residence, which is even more remote, in the woods of Banffshire. Mace is still in a period of self-re-evaluation and contemplation and has found escape and comfort in song-writing. Only time will tell whether his health setback will continue to affect his decision to continue living a remote life away from ‘civilisation’, or whether he will decide to return to his previous ‘cosmic’ life and facilitate others with their own healing and self-awareness, as he had been doing for so long.

Norman Duncan: the 'shamanic monk' of Newmachar

Norman Duncan was born in Aberdeen in 1954. In his early twenties, feeling dissatisfied with his life in Scotland, he decided to embark on a life-long journey to discover his spirituality. In the course of his journey, he discovered a multitude of spiritual practices and worldviews that formulated his own particular healing approach. As with most 'neo-shamanisms', Duncan has incorporated into his approach the training he received alongside two experienced South American contemporary shamanic healers (Pio Vucetich and Claudio Naranjo), combining it with practices and worldviews from other sources of knowledge he acquired during his journey. These include the Japanese traditions of Rinzai Zen Buddhism and Aikido, the psychotherapeutic concepts of Gestalt (see, Smith 1988) and Bert Hellinger's 'Family Constellations' concept (Hellinger 2003), his own model of a four-level medicine wheel that combines life cycles with elements of nature and the four cardinal points, and work with ancestors. Duncan has named his personal healing style as 'no-way shamanism', where he integrates all of the above into the idea that shamanistic practices and teachings need to be contextualised according to the needs and milieu of the society they are found in.

While still exploring and learning shamanistic traditions alongside Vucetich and Naranjo in the late 2000s in Spain, Duncan also spent time with his family in Aberdeen twice a year. However, each time he visited, he noticed a continuing deterioration in parents' health. In 2015, while he was still in Spain, Duncan started having a series of visions in his dreams about his family and ancestors.² He interpreted these visions to be spiritual calls prompting him to return to his home country and look after his ageing parents.

Even though he initially rejected the idea of a possible return – especially since he had initially escaped Aberdeen because of childhood traumas, having been severely abused by his parents as a child – the dreams and the visions persisted for weeks. After days of meditation and consultation with his friend, another healer, the idea of a permanent return to his home country began to make sense. As Duncan told me: *'I work with and teach about the completion of cycles and deep respect for ancestors. The dreams seemed to be calling me towards this and it makes sense.'* (via email, March 2019)

2 In shamanism, dreams are not only a technique of journeying into the spiritual world, but can also be interpreted as visions and spiritual calls. The dream world is thought of as a real world in shamanism, while dreams are considered possible foretellers in need of interpretation, which Duncan eventually perceived in the same way (Walsh 1994: 10).

In the early spring of 2015, Duncan eventually succumbed to the spirits' persistence and accepted their 'call' to return to Scotland. The formal move happened in September 2015.

Since the move, Duncan has spent most of his time looking after his father, whose health had particularly regressed. His father's care was even more difficult for Duncan, as he has suffered from severe osteoarthritis in his left leg for many years. He therefore decided to divide his time between his father's sheltered apartment in the city centre and the small piece of land handed down to him by his parents in the woods outside Newmachar, a small town ten miles north-west of Aberdeen.

In Newmachar, Duncan lives in a very confined living space, more specifically, in a caravan surrounded by the Aberdeenshire woods. Duncan told me that his decision to move into the caravan was a voluntary one and happened for two reasons: his limited finances and the fact that he needed some 'breathing space' so that he could reconnect with nature, further explore his spirituality, isolate from the mental and physical struggles that came along with caring for his parents, and reconcile with his past. However, this secluded lifestyle also gave Duncan the opportunity to further explore some other human mechanisms, such as survival and self-sufficiency. He started planting and growing his own vegetables, learning about the local mushroom varieties, and further exploring the natural herbs that grow in the region. He even told me that he was setting traps to catch rabbits and squirrels, although I am not sure whether he was joking or not.

Duncan's decision to go back to the land is not something new in the contemporary world. Many movements are based on the ideals of returning to nature and self-sustenance for political reasons (see anarcho-primitivism, Humphrey 2007), as part of a philosophical system which emphasises the importance of ruralism (see agrarianism, Danbom 1991), or, as a way of life (see the 'Back-to-Nature' movement, Dallmayr 2011).

Therefore, considering his choice of lifestyle, it made sense that, when asked about his self-identification, Duncan used a term closely connected with eremitism. In his opinion, he is:

'A monk! I'm investigating. I discover. I'm investigating, I'm on a path of investigating and...natural spirituality and helping other people with that as well. [...] Studying and working with the earth and the cycles. Losing myself, getting tangled up, and helping being compassionate to myself and helping other people.'
(Norman Duncan, 6 August 2016, Elphinstone Institute Archives)

Duncan's choice of the word 'monk' can be interpreted as the outcome of two factors: on the one hand, it is indicative of his current choice of lifestyle, and on the other, it relates to his past experience when he used to live as a Buddhist monk. When he first made the decision to move abroad in the early 1980s, Duncan ended up in southern Italy. There, he lived in a small cottage with one of his sisters for around two years, before deciding to take a further step on his spiritual journey by joining the Buddhist Zenshin-ji monastery in Umbria, central Italy. He would remain there for three years (1982–1985). At the monastery, Duncan was initiated into Rinzai Zen Buddhism, one of the three main sects of Japanese Zen Buddhism,³ by Engaku Taino. Rinzai Zen is also one of the Zen Buddhism sects that emphasise the significance of monastic living, which demands strict discipline and profound concentration from its disciples (Baroni 2000). These are attributes that have profoundly affected Duncan's current approach to and way of life.

As with Mace, even in his period of self-isolation, devoted to working on his own self-healing and looking after his ageing parents, Duncan has been able to offer healing or motivation to the few individuals he has come into contact with. One of them is Sheena Milton.

Duncan's first contact with Sheena was during a chance meeting a few months before his final return. Since then, Duncan has been working with Sheena spiritually on a personal level.

I met Sheena in late October 2016 during a workshop that she had organised for Duncan in Kemnay, a village sixteen miles west of Aberdeen. A year later, I asked her to contribute to my research by sharing her thoughts on her spiritual relationship with Duncan. She described how Duncan's 'no-way' healing approach supports her and how important this connection is for her:

'To be a part of this 'no-way' shamanic healing network of connections is invaluable to me. [...] I accept, when I approach him for any support and advice, that he will offer his wisdom for healing in a generous way. [...] Thus, his observant, thoughtful support and awareness supports my personal growth and enables me to live more fully. I am filled with an immense feeling of gratitude for everything, [...] challenging though it is at times, for the part of my life which Norman is.' (Sheena Milton, 27 July 2017, Elphinstone Institute Archives)

Duncan's healing abilities and his personal struggles and challenges which eventually led to his current 'monastic' lifestyle were also apparent

3 The other two are Sōtō and Ōbaku.

to the postgraduate students at the Elphinstone Institute of the University of Aberdeen, where he shares his insights, experiences, and approach as a healer with the students, as a guest of Vernacular Medicine classes. The post-graduate student Eilidh MacLeod-Whiteford was asked to share her thoughts with me. She said *‘I responded very positively to his openness about the very difficult circumstances of his early life, and the ongoing challenges/consequences of that in his adult life. [...] There was something of the wounded-healer⁴ in his personality.’* (via email, July 2018) She concluded by saying that she was amazed with his gift for storytelling and the inspiration he brought to the class.

To summarise, one of the main teachings that Duncan offers to others is to fully embrace one’s journey. Therefore, it makes sense that he himself considers his current decision to lead a secluded life as part of his own personal life cycle, his own adventurous journey. However, even in isolation, Duncan has been able to influence the lives of some of the people he has connected with since going back to his home country, thus again demonstrating that, even in seclusion, the folk healer is still an integral part of the community, who is sought for healing and guidance.

Asceticism and its evolution in modern times

Fitouchi, André and Baumard (2020) argue that asceticism in spirituality should be regarded as a type of a ‘culturally evolved “technology”’ contributing to the accomplishment of long-term goals, one of which is psychological wellbeing. It is also significant that they consider contemporary spiritualities such as neo-shamanism(s) to be ascetic, capable of supporting individual well-being through moderation, self-discipline, and the mastery of pleasure. Similarly, Deezia argues that in modern times, asceticism has been able to help individuals create a new identity, and/or be integrated into the ‘immediate cultural environment and the unexpressed, but present, system that underlies it’ (Deezia 2017: 94).

As seen above, the current lifestyles of Mace and Duncan fit with these two concepts. Firstly, both practitioners use asceticism as a mechanism to accomplish long-term goals, and, in particular, the maintenance of their psychosomatic wellbeing after a lifetime of dealing with, and being affected

4 The term ‘wounder-healer’ is a concept put forward by Joan Halifax in 1982. Halifax argued that the archetypal shamanic healer is an individual who, while in isolation, learns how to manage and control the symptoms and/or repercussions of their own mental health and personal traumas; upon their return to society these individuals offer their knowledge in order to heal others (Halifax 1982).

by, other people's issues. Secondly, asceticism is either part of the process of creating a new identity (see Mace), or of the re-integration process into a new cultural environment and its underlying system (see Duncan, back in Aberdeen after four decades).

In conjunction with the above ideas, and returning to Butler's concept, it is also more than apparent that both Mace and Duncan chose a 'natural' ascetic lifestyle over corporeal torment. Once again, this type of seclusion seems to better fit with the contemporary 'Western' lifestyle, where 'cosmic' life cannot be completely abandoned or overlooked; these individuals still need to pay their bills, buy groceries, and interact with public services and authorities. This substantially differentiates contemporary 'Western' healing practices from 'traditional' ones, where constant suffering, corporeal and spiritual, is considered a form of a perpetual connection to the world of spirits not only for the self-transformation of the healer, but also for the benefit of others (Walsh 1994: 17–21).

This process of inner transformation achieved through asceticism in contemporary practices can also be considered a type of 'inner-worldly' asceticism, a term first introduced by Max Weber (2005). Weber divides asceticism into 'other-worldly' asceticism, which attempts to connect the individual to deities or otherworldly powers, usually in a ritualistic form, and 'inner-worldly' asceticism, which helps the individual learn how to be 'in the world, but not of it' (Smith 2005: 355). According to Weber, an individual living an 'inner-worldly' ascetic way of life focuses on his or her own detachment from materiality instead of totally renouncing it, as seen in the cases of the two healers in question. This is, therefore, another notion that supports the argument that contemporary asceticism has become primarily a spiritual process of self-discipline rather than a physical one.

Also related to all of the above notions is the fact that asceticism in the post-modern world can be regarded as another manifestation of the phenomenon of individualism in contemporary spiritualities.

More analytically, on the one hand, one encounters traditional 'non-Western' spiritualities – shamanistic or otherwise – that are generally considered 'autochthonous' local phenomena, having survived with minor or major interruptions up until the present time (Hoppál 1996: 101–2). Therefore, the ascetic aspect of those traditions is mostly regarded as an integral, perpetuated part of their worldviews and techniques (Walsh 1994). On the other hand, 'Western' ascetic lifestyles in contemporary spiritualities, as seen in this study, are entirely the result of individual decisions made by people that happen to be located within the same regional settings. There is no unity or consensus in their processes, and these processes cannot be considered time-resistant practices, passed on from generation to genera-

tion. And even if we do accept that a solitary life might have been part of local, other-than-Christian, spiritual healing traditions such as witchcraft or druidry, we also need to keep in mind that those traditions have not been time-persistent, as they have either gone underground or totally vanished, thus making the above statement historically problematic. As Robert Muchembled correctly summarises, after ‘thousands of years of Christianity and syncretism [...] between ancient pagan traditions and those of Catholicism’ it is impossible to actually determine the origins and context of any of these practices (Muchembled 1990: 148).

However, what seems unquestionable is the fact that, as mentioned above, the decision to lead a solitary life as a contemporary healer is entirely the outcome of an individual inner process, as part of a recent trend in the post-modern ‘Western’ world.

Robert Bellah wrote extensively on the phenomenon of spiritual individualism, arguing that it is essentially the basis of contemporary spirituality, as an outcome of a ‘crisis of meaning, a religious crisis’ (Bellah 1976: 339), while the individual himself (herself) is ‘capable, within limits, of continual self-transformation, and capable, again within limits, of remaking the world, including the very symbolic forms with which he deals with it, even the forms that state the unalterable conditions of his own existence’ (Bellah, 1970: 42).

This is also the case of the two healers in this study. After years of spiritual quests and training, they ended up offering their services as healers. However, after a series of crises, they made the decision to continue their spiritual self-actualisation and transformation processes by secluding themselves in order to find an inner balance. Moreover, these processes occurred within the individuals’ own limits, as well the limits – or the context – of the society they live in, as Bellah suggests. Leonard Primiano, a leading scholar in vernacular religion, argues that such individuals should be regarded as prime examples of ‘the innumerable and wondrous variations of human religiosity’ found nowadays within the totality of ‘conscious, unconscious, aesthetic, and affective contexts’ and ‘several systems of medical, political, religious, and other types of belief’, and that they need to be examined as parts of the broader holistic culture (Primiano 1997: 713).

Furthermore, when it comes to eremitism as part of shamanistic healing traditions in particular, the historian Ronald Hutton suggested that eremitism in shamanism is actually ‘the one, truly universal pattern’ (Hutton 2001: 74). Roger Walsh writes about the importance of seclusion in the shamanic healer’s work: ‘The demands and distractions of society usually hinder profound inner searching and self-knowledge. Consequently, periodic withdrawal and solitude may be essential’ (Walsh 1994: 19–20). However,

here it also needs to be noted that in contemporary shamanism(s), the idea of the shamanic healer as hermit has started to wane; even in places that are considered traditionally shamanistic, practitioners have embraced the urban lifestyle. In Central and South America, the efficacy of the *curanderos* depends on their availability and popularity (Joralemon – Douglas 1993), while in Mongolia and Siberia, some healers offer their services in GP practices (Wallis 2003: 224; Hamayon 2005: 625).

What also needs to be examined alongside this idea is the social or communal perspective of life in isolation in relation to healing practices, that is to say, how the healer, even when leading a life in isolation, can heal the person or socially integrate the community, as Yoder suggests. The response seems quite straightforward: People sought, seek, and will probably continue to seek answers to their health problems or issues, whether somatic or psychological (Mayer 2008; Kirmayer 2013). If people did not still believe in folk medicine, folk healers and their efficacy, these traditions would have long ceased to exist (Hufford 1997: 547). The healer, whether considered an outcast, or an eccentric, is seen by the community as an individual with extraordinary powers, capable of using them to treat others. In simple terms, he or she is 'not a private mystic, but exists to serve the community' (Vitebsky 1995: 110). However, there is a rather significant difference between neo-, and traditional shamanistic healing practices when it comes to community integration, cohesion, and restoration: In traditional shamanisms, the healing performances require the participation of the whole, or part of, the local community (Sidky 2009 175–176), whereas in neo-shamanism(s), the healer's community is based on human relations and social ties, and not regional boundaries. Victor Turner named this post-modern community 'communitas' (Turner 1969).

Applying the above notions to the two healers, both Mace and Duncan sought solitude as a means of redirecting their attention away from distractions. They decided to abandon social life and materialism, ongoing issues, and prolonged inner battles that had affected them profoundly. Instead, they turned their focus towards finding time to cultivate their own minds and re-approaching their lives. However, even in such a secluded period in their lives, both Mace and Duncan have been able to affect, inspire, and help transform some of the individuals they have come into contact with, as demonstrated in this article. Even in periods of personal struggle or self-doubt, they still were able to 'find out causes of domestic and personal troubles and solicit divine support to solve them through ritual and divination' for others (Takiguchi 1990: 1). Mace's partner, Christine, once verbalised the impact Mace has had on people over the years, even during the period of his physical and emotional struggles:

‘[Mace] helped, relieved, guided, healed a very large number of people when traditional methods and treatments were not effective. It really changed the life of a few other people. He gave a lot of himself to help others. He always did the maximum and more.’ (Christine Dijoux, 22 July 2017, Elphinstone Institute Archives)

This impact seems to be reciprocal. It might be the fact that these healers display a certain kind of vulnerability that draws people towards them and helps them experience compassion and healing alongside them. Also, at the same time, by coming in contact with other people and their problems, the healers might be able to find a source of inspiration that can help them reflect on their own issues and be able to sympathise or even reconcile with themselves. Either way, even on the back roads as outcasts, as Yoder characterises it, the two healers still have the ability to heal, support, guide, and socially integrate others, even if their current priority is looking after themselves while they are in isolation.

Conclusion

The traditions of asceticism and eremitism are not disappearing. Instead, they are transforming into a different set of practices, aligned with the settings and needs of contemporary post-modern society and culture. As Jacqueline Duff argues, ‘the perception of a hermit in the twenty-first century is of a solitary individual deliberately isolating him or herself from society [...] determined to interact as little as possible with the everyday world’ (Duff 2001: 13), and focusing primarily on his or her inner transformative process without suffering corporeally as much as in the past. In healing practices – in this case, (neo)shamanistic ones – this change is more than apparent, as seen above. Moreover, just as ‘the shamanic performance (as well as the habitus and skills deployed by its practitioners) has changed’ in neo-shamanisms (Ali, 2015: 48), the eremitic lifestyle and habitus and skills of the contemporary shamanic healer as hermit have also changed. To the rest of society, these individuals might still seem eccentric or unsociable, as they were viewed in the past. However, even in seclusion, these people have succeeded in being valuable members of their community by interacting with its members and offering their services as healing practitioners.

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